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Japan-South Korea Relations: Slowly Lifting the Burden of History?

Seongho Sheen



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Japan-South Korea Relations: Slowly Lifting the Burden of History?

Japan and South Korea have long been defined as “close but distant neighbors.” The two countries are close geographically, but Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula between 1910 and 1945 has left a deep scar on relations and remains a painful subject for most Korean people. Japan has expressed regret for its past behavior, but is tired of repeated demands for an apology. More than a half-century later, full reconciliation between the two countries is yet to be achieved. Recently though, the two nations and their leaders are making efforts to move beyond the past and build a constructive relationship between the two most developed nations in East Asia and key U.S. allies in the region.

The relationship between Japan (the second largest economy with the second largest defense budget) and South Korea (the twelfth largest economy with the sixth largest military force) has significant bearing on the region’s security. In particular, cooperation between Japan and South Korea will be critical for U.S. handling of North Korea’s nuclear issue and Washington’s future alliance strategy in the region. Despite recent progress in diplomacy resulting from the initiatives of leaders of both countries, Japan-South Korea relations remain fragile. The two nations face tough challenges from issues in the past, present, and future: disputes over history, North Korea, Japan’s military role, and negotiation of a free trade agreement (FTA). Although U.S. military restructuring calls for closer Japan-South Korea cooperation in defense, it will require a sea change in South Korea’s negative view of Japan before a robust U.S.-Japan-Korea alliance develops.

New Partnership in the Twenty-first Century?

As South Korea achieved progress in democracy in the 1990s following its remarkable economic success in the 1970s and 1980s, its leaders launched a bold initiative to upgrade its relations with Japan in the late 1990s. The groundwork for advancing a new relationship had been laid by President Kim Dae Jung’s visit to Tokyo in 1998. In a joint statement, Kim and Prime Minister Keijō Obuchi announced an initiative to build a “New Japan-ROK Partnership toward the 21st Century.”¹ In a surprising gesture to put aside past differences and seek future-oriented ties, Kim did not request an apology for Japan’s colonization of Korea. Instead, he praised Japan’s post-war effort to promote peace and prosperity in the international society through its Peace Constitution and overseas development assistance. Kim’s forgiving statement was largely appreciated by his Japanese counterpart, who saw it as an effort to bring closure to the long-standing burden of history between the two countries. The summit committed Japan and South Korea to put the issues of the past behind them and to build constructive relations based on shared basic values such as liberal democracy and market economy.

Although less noted than his sunshine policy with North Korea, Kim Dae Jung’s reconciliation effort with Japan deserves credit as an important diplomatic achievement. Most Koreans still hold a grudge against the Japanese occupation, and Korean nationalism has been largely defined by an anti-Japanese stance. Even though post-war Japan has sought to promote bilateral cooperation, South Korean resentment toward Japan, aggravated by recurring disputes over history issues, has been a major stumbling block in their relations. Kim’s rapprochement initiative required determination and pragmatism against the anti-Japanese nationalism prevalent in Korean society. Kim argued that cooperation in sharing democracy between the two most advanced economies should not be hindered by emotion from the past.

The newly elected South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun pledged to continue his predecessor’s effort. During his state visit to Japan in June 2003, Roh, the first South Korean leader born after the Japanese occupation, tried to keep the harsh memory of the past from overshadowing his visit by not mentioning history issues such as the demand for a Japanese apology or the revision of Japanese textbooks that gloss over the colonial past. Nor did Roh discuss more recent recriminations over Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi’s visits to

Yasukuni Shrine, which are seen by South Koreans as paying respect to Japan's convicted war criminals during World War II. It was the first time a South Korean leader visiting Japan did not bring up the history issue, let alone ask for an apology. The significance of this was augmented by two additional factors: 1) heated public criticism in South Korea about the passage of a war contingency bill in the Japanese Diet; and 2) Roh's official dinner appointment at the Emperor's Palace scheduled on South Korea's memorial day. To make matters worse, a prominent Japanese politician made a controversial comment regarding Japan's colonial rule that outraged Koreans just before Roh's visit. Whether it was his personal affinity with Japan (the only foreign country to which Roh had traveled before his presidency) or pragmatic considerations of national interest, it required courage for Roh to forgo a Korean political ritual of recalling Japanese occupation amidst anti-Japanese sentiment among his fellow Koreans.

Instead, Roh urged South Korea and Japan to work together to open the "Era of Northeast Asia in the 21st Century."² Pointing out that Northeast Asia has lagged far behind other regions in terms of integration, Roh said South Korea and Japan should take the leading role in opening the cooperative future under the new community. Asked about Japan's new wartime bill, Roh told reporters, "When nearby countries recognize Japan as a leading force in the quest for peace in Northeast Asia, then the emergency-related laws will for the first time pose no problems at all." On the history issue, Roh said South Korea would be better off not to provoke Japan by criticizing its military buildup, and historical antagonism should not continue to plague the relationship between the two countries. Expressing appreciation for Roh's silence on his visit to Yasukuni Shrine, Koizumi told reporters, "With this person, we can build a cooperative relationship together toward the future." Contrary to the harsh criticism in Seoul, Roh's visit was viewed as a success in Tokyo where his determination to focus on the future rather than the past was well appreciated by Japanese politicians and the public.

Notwithstanding occasional political clashes, Japan and South Korea have cultivated their friendliest relations in years. The two countries have expanded government-level dialogue while significantly increasing human exchanges. Precious antiques and traditional music performers have gone back and forth between the countries. Television programs have been co-produced and visual artists have exhibited in Japan and South Korea. Korean pop singers, films and recipes have inundated the Japanese market and Japan's cartoon characters have flooded Korea. Another remarkable development is South Korea's lifting of long-standing restrictions on Japanese cultural imports. For the first time since the 1965 diplomatic normalization, Japanese pop music and movies have been played on Korean television and in theaters. In June 2002 the two countries successfully co-hosted the World Cup Soccer competition, during which a Japanese crowd cheered for the South Korean team's remarkable semi-final performance.

The passage of time has allowed historical hatred to fade as young people on both sides have grown more interested in each other's music, films, food and culture without the memory of the unfortunate past. More importantly, however, it is perhaps the confidence derived from the political and economic progress South Korea has achieved over the past decades vis-à-vis its richer and more advanced neighbor (whose economy slipped into a decade of recession) that has led to a more relaxed and pragmatic view of Japan among South Korean people. Meanwhile, South Korea's success has also significantly improved Korea's image among the Japanese, who used to view Korea with disdain for its authoritarian military rule in the seventies and eighties. The growing South Korean confidence will facilitate a more cooperative relationship between the two countries. Yet, it will also require political determination from South Korean leadership to continue efforts to build mutual trust in light of episodic anti-Japanese sentiment among Koreans. Roh's visit to Tokyo showed that the effort to build a true partnership would continue under the new government in Seoul despite public mistrust regarding Japan.

History Still Hurts

Despite the efforts and the progress made by the two countries to promote a better relationship, old pains from the past do not go away easily. In June 2003, Taro Aso, a top policy maker from the Policy Research Council of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), sparked outrage among South Koreans by saying that during the colonial occupation Japan adopted the policy of changing Korean names into Japanese names because Koreans wanted to do so. His remark drew sharp criticism from fellow Japanese politicians as adversely affecting the relations between Japan and South Korea, especially because the comment was made just a few days before President Roh's first state visit to Tokyo.³ Aso later expressed regret that his remarks caused damage to Japan-Korea relations. However, the incident invited an old indignation among South Koreans that the Japanese do not take their past wrongdoings seriously and try to cover up or deny wartime atrocities inflicted on Korea.

This latest episode is a reminder that the history of the Japanese occupation a half a century ago remains a thorny issue between Tokyo and Seoul, despite efforts by recent leaders from both countries to put the issue aside. The history of Japan's brutal occupation during the colonial period, taught in great detail starting in elementary school, has constantly agonized Korean people as they see a lack of sincere effort by Japan to acknowledge its past. The history issue—such as the controversy surrounding Japanese school textbooks overlooking Japan's wartime atrocity—along with the recurring denial of Japanese officials about Japan's wrongdoings and the prime minister's visit to Yasukuni Shrine, have been major obstacles in Japan-South Korea relations.

Meanwhile, from the Japanese perspective, the overemphasized history issue (often exploited by political leadership and the media) remains a useful tool for South Korea to bash Japan and promote Korean nationalism. As Japan responded with numerous efforts to accommodate South Korean sensitivities, a growing sense of "apology fatigue" among the Japanese public created indifference toward the issue—especially among the younger generation—while causing resentment among "neo-conservative" nationalists who try to influence the domestic debate on history issues toward greater intransigence.⁴ A recent surge of nationalist backlash against concessions on history issues tends to collide directly with South Korea's anti-Japanese nationalism, thus complicating the reconciliation effort between Tokyo and Seoul.

Among Koreans, differing perceptions of history often lead to unqualified skepticism toward Japan's defense policy, as South Korea recently expressed concerns about the passage of Japan's wartime contingency bill. From the Japanese perspective, the bill—long overdue—simply gives the country's self-defense force authority to take a more active role to counter foreign aggression. However, the bill has caused alarm in South Korea, which has bitter memories of Japanese militarism and opposes any steps toward Japanese rearmament. South Koreans were particularly angry at the timing of the bill's passage, which perhaps just coincidentally occurred on the first day of Roh's visit to Tokyo. President Roh's own party expressed "rage and resentment" toward the Japanese government while the opposition party spokesman denounced the Diet's voting as "diplomatic violence" that completely humiliates the Korean government and people.⁵ Facing domestic criticism on his trip to Tokyo, Roh briefly acknowledged these concerns during his speech in the Japanese Diet, noting that Japan had inflicted great pain on Korea and other Asian countries in the past. Yet, many angry South Koreans and politicians criticized Roh's trip as a betrayal of national pride and humiliating diplomacy. Such criticism did not echo in Japan, whose public viewed the summit as very successful and positive for further promoting relations of the two countries. The incident showed that a wide gap still exists between South Korea and Japan regarding their troubled past.

Young generations in South Korea do not have a first-hand memory of Japanese colonialism and tend to see Japan with a more balanced view, accepting Japanese popular culture without the indignation of their parents' generation. It is also true, however, that the same young Koreans have stronger national pride and express fervent antagonism against Japan's colonial occupation with greater indignation as they grew up under unprecedented economic prosperity. The world watched the explosion of such nationalism as tens of thousands of Korean supporters cheered on the national soccer team during the 2002 World Cup. The mass candlelight protest against the United States late last year, fueled by the death of two Korean schoolgirls from a tragic accident during a U.S. military training exercise, was another showcase of ebullient Korean nationalism. Meanwhile, relatively free from the guilt of their parents' generation about the imperial past, young Japanese people appear more likely to embrace the idea of Japan becoming a normal state with a stronger military and a more prominent political role in international society. The younger generation's disposition may provide a better chance for future bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea. However, the assertion of new nationalistic sentiment in both societies could work against such a process if the perception gap on history persists.

According to Victor Cha, an expert on Japan-Korea issues, the correct barometer of Seoul-Tokyo relations is not historical animosity, which will never be resolved, but how well the bilateral relationship advances in the economic, political, and security arenas in spite of this history.⁶ Indeed, there have been gradual advances—if not breakthroughs—in bilateral ties thanks to diplomatic efforts made by leaders on both sides. Yet, it is important for both sides to make a genuine effort to forego the past gradually, if not once and for all. The unresolved history issue will remain a constant obstacle for full reconciliation even if Korean leaders continue to reach out to Japan. In 2002, the two governments launched a joint committee of Korean and Japanese experts to come up with an objective understanding of the past and to bring closure to the controversy surrounding Japanese textbooks. Such an effort should be made with the common understanding that present and future relations are too important to be spoiled by the real but dimming memory of the past.

North Korea's Nuclear Threat: A Common Enemy?

North Korea presents opportunities and challenges for Japan-South Korea relations. During the Cold War period, North Korea's conventional military threat provided a clear objective for the two countries to form an unofficial alliance through their bilateral alliance with the United States. Even though there is no official defense treaty between the two countries, their national defense strategy is closely related under the U.S. contingency plan in case of major military conflicts on the Korean Peninsula. Japan will provide important bases and logistical support for the U.S. war effort on the peninsula as it did during the Korean War. North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, including nuclear and missile development, provide even greater impetus for the two countries to work together under their alliance with the United States. Unlike its conventional military capability, North Korea's WMD pose a direct threat to the national security of Japan and South Korea.

The North Korea nuclear issue has caused Japan and South Korea to cooperate closely in coordinating their North Korea policy. The two countries have engaged, along with the United States, in a series of consultations through Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meetings. Specifically aimed to coordinate effective policy among the three countries toward North Korea, the forum has provided a unique opportunity for Tokyo and Seoul to consult on one of their most important foreign policy issues on a regular basis. During his visit to Japan, Roh said cooperation between the Asian neighbors and with the United States was vital—not least to resolve the problem of North Korea's nuclear ambitions. "South Korea, Japan and the United States are now maintaining close and positive cooperative ties for the sake of the peace of the Korean Peninsula and East Asia, and this cooperation will continue unchanged," Roh said.⁷

In particular, Japan and South Korea appear to share common security interests vis-à-vis the United States in dealing with North Korea's nuclear issue. While the United States tends to focus on North Korea's nuclear capability as a direct threat to its national security, South Korea and Japan feel other major threats coming out of North Korea's conventional weapons and missiles that target their capitals. In addition to addressing North Korea's nuclear development, Tokyo and Seoul share a common interest in preventing any kind of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula as another important priority in their North Korea policy. This makes the two countries more cautious about hard-line policies (e.g., preemptive strike and economic sanctions), which, they worry, might provoke Pyongyang into a confrontational mode. In a TCOG meeting after North Korea's surprising admission of its secret nuclear program in October 2002, the two countries reportedly asked the United States to not terminate the supply of fuel oil to Pyongyang in fear of escalating nuclear confrontation between the United States and North Korea.⁸ South Korea hopes Japan will share a common interest in persuading the United States of the benefits of negotiation as opposed to military confrontation. North Korea's nuclear issue gave momentum for new Japan-South Korea collaboration in dealing with their common national security threat.

At the same time, however, South Korea—traditionally suspicious of Japan's intentions on the Korean Peninsula—tends to view any of Japan's initiatives toward North Korea with a dubious eye. Many South Koreans, including government officials, believe Japan does not want unification of the two Koreas, the result of which may pose a bigger security threat to Japan. Japan's move to normalize relations with North Korea has always been watched carefully by South Koreans, who were nervous about the prospect of Tokyo bypassing Seoul in relations with Pyongyang in an effort to keep the two Koreas divided, thus maintaining the status quo in the region.⁹ Others suspect that Japan is trying to build a strong position in the North Korean economy hedging against South Korea's long-term economic interests in North Korea. Supporters of inter-Korean reconciliation hope North Korea could become an important subsidiary for the South Korean economy, providing much needed, high-quality cheap labor to South Korean industries. These supporters worry that Japan would compete with South Korea over the North Korean economy with its superior capital and industrial power. Eventually, too close of ties between Japan and North Korea will have a negative impact on South Korea's unification effort. Even if the North Korean economy benefits from economic aid from Japan, it would only prop up Kim Jong-Il's regime, which will become less keen on the North-South reconciliation. In the early 1990s, then U.S. Secretary of State James Baker observed South Korean sensitivity toward Japan's approach to North Korea, saying that although South Korea wanted to see Japan effectively use its economic leverage on the North, "their own bitter history with the Japanese will inhibit policy coordination."¹⁰

South Korea has recently become more pragmatic and less suspicious of Japan's approach to North Korea. After witnessing the huge economic cost of German unification, Seoul hopes Japan would provide much needed economic aid to and investment in North Korea, relieving South Korea's burden in the event of Korean unification. Meanwhile, as Washington tended to emphasize tougher punishment on Pyongyang's nuclear defiance, the South Korean government welcomed Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang in September 2002 and Japan's normalization effort with North Korea. Seoul expected that such a move by Japan would help in reducing tension between Pyongyang and Washington. This signaled an important change in South Korea's view of Japan's role in Korea's nuclear and unification issues.

North Korea's nuclear threat promoted the position of those in Japan who favor building a stronger military force, which in turn raised South Korean concern over resurrecting Japanese militarism. Defense Agency Director-General Shigeru Ishiba, a known hawk in Japan's government, suggested in March 2003 that Japan might consider a form of pre-emptive strike to disarm Pyongyang.¹¹ This remark surprised traditional pacifists in Japan as well as nationalists in South Korea. The controversial position was echoed by Koizumi who, in violation

of even greater political taboo, added that the country must revise its so-called Peace Constitution to give its Self-Defense Forces the status of a conventional military organization.¹² One could say the passage of war contingency bills would not have been possible were it not for North Korea's nuclear provocation.¹³ The notion of a reinvigorated Japanese military operating outside its own territory alarms South Korea. South Korea worries that right-wing Japanese politicians and policy makers are taking advantage of North Korea's provocations to reinforce their agenda for the revision of the nation's pacifist constitution and the adoption of offensive military capabilities. Many South Koreans do not understand Japanese outrage on the abduction issue—they see it as a tempest in a teapot and compare it to the massive relocation of the Korean population during the Japanese occupation.

Lately there seems to be a gap between Seoul and Tokyo in their approach to deal with Pyongyang's continuing nuclear defiance. Amidst public anger toward the North Korean regime and tension with Pyongyang over the abduction issue, the Japanese government has voiced tougher measures against North Korea, leaning closer to Washington's position. In their summit statement, Koizumi and Roh announced that the two countries broadly agree to not condone North Korea's nuclear weapons development and to seek a diplomatic solution to the crisis. But in a news conference held after their meeting, Koizumi cited the need to pressure North Korea to relinquish its nuclear ambitions while Roh emphasized the importance of dialogue. Asked about the different emphasis, Roh acknowledged that differences exist but described them as "slight."¹⁴ However, new measures taken by Tokyo, e.g., tightening inspections on North Korea's trade vessels and joining the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), cast a doubt about its policy coordination with Seoul.

How closely Tokyo and Seoul can agree on North Korea policy may have an important impact on overall bilateral relations. Cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul in inducing peaceful negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang would significantly improve their bilateral relations. In addition, Japan might make important economic contributions to North Korea's reconstruction before and after unification. Meanwhile, Japan's effort to revitalize its military with regard to the North Korean threat would cause new suspicion among South Koreans. Japan's support for military action or blockade against North Korea may create a strong nationalist backlash against Japan in South Korea.

Free Trade Agreement: More Business = Good Neighbor?

Despite political uneasiness, business has been a main driver in Japan-South Korea relations. After all, it was South Korea's need for Japanese capital and investment that led to the controversial 1965 diplomatic normalization. Recent discussions of a free trade agreement (FTA) between the two countries may have important implications for future relations because the FTA would likely strengthen political, diplomatic, and economic ties.

In many aspects, South Korea has followed the Japanese model in achieving successful economic development. Japan has been an important source of capital goods and technology for South Korea's manufacturing industries, which in turn produce South Korea's major export items. Japan has enjoyed a large trade surplus with South Korea while providing an important export market for South Korea's labor-intensive goods and agricultural products. Recently, South Korean industry has been catching up to its Japanese counterpart, competing for the world market in many fields traditionally dominated by Japan such as automobiles, shipbuilding, steel, and electronics. Today, Japan is the third largest export market for South Korea after the United States and China and is the number one source of Korean imports. Korea is the third largest trading partner for Japan in both exports and imports.

After the successful co-hosting of the 2002 World Cup Soccer Tournament, Tokyo and Seoul have agreed to study an FTA between the two countries. Civilian institutes have started research, and the industrial sectors of

both countries have proposed signing the pact. Japan seems more enthusiastic about the FTA than does South Korea. The Japanese government sees an FTA as a way to boost the flagging economy by expanding economic cooperation with other Asian countries. More importantly, Japan wants to expand its political and economic influence in the Asia Pacific vis-à-vis China's growing influence in the region. Japan has made an aggressive effort to establish an FTA with South Korea and other Southeast Asian countries. For example, Japan has penned a bilateral FTA with Singapore and is seeking similar deals with Thailand, the Philippines and Mexico. For Japan, an FTA with South Korea could spur FTAs with other countries across East Asia. Japanese officials are therefore concerned that a delay in talks with South Korea could hamper those ambitions. Since July 2002, a study group comprising representatives of academia, industry and the bureaucracies of both nations held four sessions and urged the governments to conclude a speedy and comprehensive FTA. The group initially planned to release a road map for the talks by summer 2004, through which Tokyo and Seoul would negotiate an FTA. Japan, however, wants to accelerate that timetable and demands that South Korea launch full-scale negotiations for an FTA as soon as possible. By signing an FTA, both countries would mutually abolish trade barriers, including tariffs and quantitative import quotas. Tokyo also wants to cooperate with Seoul in further opening the two countries' service sectors.

But progress has been slow as Seoul, fearing a growing trade deficit, has been reluctant to respond to Tokyo's demands. According to the Korea Trade Association, South Korea has had an almost \$200 billion trade deficit with Japan since the formal diplomatic agreement in 1965. The deficit has been growing each year and some say it could increase by more than \$6 billion in the wake of an FTA. The deficit persists despite the fact that South Korea's average tariff rate on Japanese imports is about eight percent, against the three percent average tariff Japan charges on South Korean products.¹⁵

South Korea worries that its economy is becoming a subsidiary of Japan's powerful manufacturing industry. South Koreans believe an FTA will allow superior Japanese goods and technologies to dominate its domestic market. In fact, many experts from both sides believe that an FTA with Japan will benefit the Korean economy by providing access to a much bigger export market for Korean industry in the long term. Indeed, much of South Korea's imports from Japan consist of high-value industrial equipment and materials, which are critical for South Korea's export-oriented manufacturing industries.

Yet South Korea feels it needs more time. Seoul has already signed an FTA with Chile, which sparked a backlash from the powerful agricultural sectors that stand to lose from reductions in tariffs. The treaty has boiled over into a political issue and has yet to be ratified by the legislature. The South Korean government expects a much bigger challenge in signing an FTA with Japan, given the widespread public misgivings on Japanese intentions as well as the comprehensive nature of the impact of an FTA on the economy. In the summit meeting, Tokyo asked Seoul to agree to start bilateral FTA talks by the end of this year but South Korea did not want to set a time frame.

The new Roh government may prove to be a good partner for Japan on this issue. Because Roh has been a champion of a policy promoting economic ties in Northeast Asia, he is expected to be more positive about the idea of an FTA with Japan. In their joint statement after the summit, Koizumi and Roh agreed to start the FTA negotiations as soon as possible. Although the two leaders did not specify a concrete schedule for the negotiation, they agreed that the FTA would increase bilateral trade and investment and strengthen the competitiveness of both sides, thereby contributing to mutual economic growth. An FTA could open a new era of friendship between the two nations since it will require a commitment from political leaders on both sides to work together toward a common goal.

Big Brother Wants You: U.S. Force Restructuring and Japan-Korea Military Cooperation

The restructuring of the U.S. military presence in the region would likely require an adjustment in Japan-South Korea security relations. It seems Washington is going to ask the two allies to take more responsibility for their own national security. The U.S. forces in the two countries will assume a more prominent role for broader global security in addition to their original mission of defending the two allies. This could create pressure for more cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo with regards to security issues. However, given South Korea's sensitivities about Japan's rearmament, it is doubtful that the two countries could suddenly build strong military-to-military relations.

Despite Washington's hope to develop a more robust alliance in Northeast Asia, the Seoul-Tokyo relationship has been the weakest segment in the triangular relationship between the three countries. There has been no formal military relationship between the two most important U.S. Asian allies. Yet, unlike the post-Cold War NATO alliance in Europe, the three countries face a clear and common threat posed by North Korea. While North Korea's nuclear and other WMD programs present a tougher and more urgent challenge to the alliance, there is a growing need for the United States to strengthen the alliance to cope with the threat and to prepare for an uncertain future of a reconciled—if not unified—Korean Peninsula. South Korea and Japan have pledged close cooperation in their three-way alliance with the United States in dealing with North Korea's nuclear threat. However, it has been unclear how much this kind of allegiance would translate into actual military cooperation between Japan and South Korea in case of armed conflict.

As Japan seeks support from neighboring countries for its effort to become a normal nation, forging a strong relationship with Seoul has become an important foreign policy priority. Since the Gulf War in 1991, the United States has been pressing Japan to take more responsibility for its own security and stability in the region commensurate to its economic power, envisioning a U.S.-Japan alliance similar to the U.S.-British alliance in Europe.¹⁶ The September 11 terrorist attacks only increased the demand for Japan to become a more active partner of the U.S. global strategy. The so-called Japan neo-conservatives welcome the U.S. call. Increasing numbers of Japanese politicians and leaders embrace the idea of Japan becoming a "normal state" by taking a more active military role in international politics. They regard China as a strategic competitor and call for a stronger Japan-U.S.-Korea alliance.¹⁷

South Korea does not appear ready for Japan's increasing military role. When Japan dispatched an Aegis class warship during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) as a part of its military support for the U.S. global war on terrorism, most South Koreans, including government officials, expressed concern about Japan's rearmament. As Roh said in the Japanese Diet (speaking of South Korea's concerns about the passage of Japan's war contingency bills), South Korea has been watching Japan's debate over the role of its military and the possible revision of its pacifist constitution with "suspicion and anxiety."¹⁸

Meanwhile, the U.S. focus on terrorism, WMD, and changing national security strategy, coupled with the development of new military technology, calls for a readjustment of the U.S. alliance structure with Japan and South Korea. The new U.S. military doctrine of flexible forward deployed force structure prompted a review of America's military presence in Japan and South Korea, where about 100,000 U.S. troops are stationed. Under the new strategic concept, Japan will serve as one of several permanent U.S. military "hubs," as will other important strategic places such as Guam and Britain. The U.S. military presence in South Korea, on the other hand, will consist of "forward operating bases" maintained by small, permanent units that support the hub in Japan. Although South Korea will not be a military hub, the forward operating bases will figure more prominently than "forward operating locations," which will have unmaintained staging areas and will be located in other regions.¹⁹

The United States will relocate force structures scattered around the two countries in a way that promotes effective use of force based on more flexibility and speed. For this, the Pentagon announced a plan to consolidate U.S. bases in South Korea, the most far-reaching restructuring of U.S. forces in South Korea for 50 years. While announcing a four-year, \$11 billion investment plan for the restructuring effort—which includes moving Yongsan garrison out of downtown Seoul and the 2nd infantry division near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to the south of Seoul—Washington is asking Seoul to invest more in its national defense to fill the vacuum left by relocating U.S. forces. The more flexible and consolidated U.S. forces in South Korea might assume a regional role and be ready to be dispatched to other parts of Asia in addition to their traditional role as a deterrent against North Korea, although it remains an open question how and if Seoul can agree to such a role. Defense officials said there is no plan for moving all 20,000 Marines out of Okinawa. But they said they are looking at ways of repositioning the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force from its current locations in Okinawa, Hawaii and Guam.²⁰ More coordination might be necessary between the restructured forces in South Korea and Japan. This might mean the U.S. forces in the two countries will be managed in a more integrated way. In May 2003, the U.S. military launched a training exercise deploying a fully equipped company of 500 marines from Okinawa to South Korea in less than 24 hours using a high-speed ferry. The exercise, aimed at enhancing the wartime deployment capability of the U.S. military in the region, clearly indicated the increasing importance of integrated force management under the new U.S. military thinking in the region. This will in turn increase the demand for closer military-to-military cooperation between Japan and South Korea.

The proposed plan to bolster U.S. missile defense efforts in the region will have a similar effect. In the backdrop of an increasing nuclear threat by Pyongyang, Tokyo has moved toward full cooperation with the United States in this matter, despite the concern regarding the Chinese response. Japan is now reportedly considering acquiring an Aegis destroyer-based Standard Missile 3 (SM3) system developed by the United States, as well as the surface-to-air guided Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3) system.²¹ Meanwhile, Washington announced deployment of more PAC-3 systems to South Korea as a part of a new military re-enforcement plan in Korea. South Korea is reportedly planning to purchase 48 PAC-3 missiles of its own as part of a defense buildup program. Japan and South Korea's adoption of a U.S.-built missile defense system, with significant political as well as strategic implications vis-à-vis China, will consolidate the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral alliance.

However, a formal military partnership between Japan and South Korea will require a sea change in South Korea's skeptical view of Japan's military role in the region. Over the years there has been a gradual but significant increase in military cooperation activities between Japan and South Korea, including exchange programs between military personnel and defense officials at various levels, port calls and search and rescue (SAR) exercises. Yet, because many Koreans see Japan as a potential strategic competitor rather than a partner vis-à-vis China, full-scale defense cooperation—let alone a formal defense treaty—will require a fundamental shift in overall South Korean views on Japan and in South Korea's strategic calculations. It is doubtful that such a change will occur in the near future given South Korea's deep indignation about Japan's military past.

Conclusion

Can Japan and South Korea overcome their unfortunate past and become true friends? Although the history issue still runs deep, there is more hope for improving ties as the two countries' leaders are making genuine efforts to move beyond the past. With progress in democracy as well as economic development, South Korea has gained self-confidence and has become less obsessive about its past, and is taking a more pragmatic approach to the history issue, which is appreciated by Japan. President Roh's decision to forgo the history

issue during his visit to Tokyo in June 2003 should be credited as another important step to build a stronger relationship with Japan. It will be helpful if Japan responds with a more sensitive approach to South Korean sentiment. In particular, Japan should make a conscious effort not to ally South Korea and China against itself due to unscrupulous remarks occasionally made by its officials regarding the history issue. Both Japan and South Korea have a clear common interest in working together for economic prosperity. The FTA may prove to be a promising convergence for the two neighbors to enhance their relationship and to solidify bilateral initiatives between Japan and South Korea without involving the United States, which is often a dominating figure in their foreign relations.

Indeed, North Korea creates an interesting dynamic for bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea as well as their relations with the United States. Despite their publicly claimed common approach to North Korea, Washington's "punish bad behavior" approach created tension with Seoul's emphasis on negotiated settlement. Tokyo seems to be caught in the middle, reflecting its strategic concern of North Korean retaliation on one hand, and public anger over the abduction issue coupled with the importance of the alliance with the United States on the other. If the United States insists on tougher North Korea policy against South Korea's wish for negotiation, Japan may have to make a difficult choice between its commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance and the prospect of gaining political trust from South Korea by addressing its concerns.

Strong ties between Tokyo and Seoul are more vital to U.S. interests than ever as Washington's new push for military restructuring in the region requires a more integrated force structure and management among the U.S. military forces and their counterparts in the two countries. Yet, military-to-military relations between Japan and South Korea will remain the weakest link of the trilateral alliance in the anticipated future. South Korea still has strong misgivings about Japan's effort to normalize its defense posture and is not ready to accept Japan's more active role in military and international affairs. Indeed, South Korea's growing ties with China—backed by rapidly expanding trade—may complicate the U.S. alliance strategy in Northeast Asia. If the restructuring effort focuses on containing China's power by enhancing Japan's military capability, it might drive South Korea to take a more neutral stance, distancing itself from the alliance with the United States and Japan. In sum, despite the two countries' efforts to improve bilateral ties, Japan-South Korea relations will remain vulnerable to challenges from geopolitics in the region and will continue to be largely influenced by U.S. alliance strategy.

Dr. Seongho Sheen is an Assistant Research Professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. He focuses on East Asian politics and security issues, particularly those involving the Korean Peninsula. Sheen was previously a research fellow at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis (IFPA) in Cambridge, Massachusetts and a faculty member in the Political Science Department of University of Massachusetts at Boston. Dr. Sheen also served in the ROK Army as a public relations officer and was a research assistant at the Korea Information Society Development Institute (KISDI).

Dr. Sheen's work has appeared in the Korean Journal of Defense Analysis and the LA Times. Dr. Sheen is the author of "Grudging Partner: South Korea's Response to U.S. Security Policies" in Special Assessment: Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies (March 2003). His recent contribution to the Asia-Pacific Security Studies series is "New President on the Block, Tough Challenges Ahead: South Korea's 2002 Presidential Election" (June 2003).

Notes

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9. Cha describes the view as offensive realism. See Victor Cha, "Defensive Realism and Japan's Approach toward Korean Reunification," *NBR Analysis: Perspectives on the Future of the Korean Peninsula*, vol. 14, no. 1 (June 2003)
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11. Hun-Joo Cho, "Neo-Conservative Japanese in The Spotlight," *Dong-A Ilbo* (May 13, 2003)
12. Richard Lloyd Parry, "Japan Flexes Military Muscle Over Korea," *London Times* (May 22, 2003). Mr. Koizumi said in front of parliament, "In substance, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) are a military," and "it is unnatural that we cannot say so. The day will come when the SDF are recognized under a revised Constitution and given appropriate honor and positions without unproductive debates."
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